

Try BookShorts on for size

A new series of short films based on literary works could provide a big boost for publishers

BY REBECCA CALDWELL

The next chapter in book publishing has been written, and not by authors but by filmmakers.

Welcome to the idea of BookShorts: a series of short film adaptations of books which, if they catch on, may do for publishing what music videos did for the recording industry.

The vision of producer Judith Keenan, the very first one — an adaptation of Susan Swan's latest novel, *What Casanova Told Me*, due out in stores Sept. 18 — airs tonight on Bravo! as part of the *Bravo!Fact Presents* showcase. Clocking in at just under seven minutes, complete with credits, the short film stars Deborah Hay as Luce, a woman entranced by the letters between an ancestor named Asked For Adams (also played by Hay) and legendary lover Casanova (Jaymz Bee), and is co-directed by Ed Gass-Donnelly and Marco Pecota.

What Casanova Told Me is presented along with Douglas Bensadoun's adaptation of Al Purdy's poem *At the Quinte Hotel*, featuring Tragically Hip front man Gord Downie as a young, beer-drinking and brawling poet, and *A Question*, Soo-Won Lee's multi-character presentation of Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

The books aren't meant to replace the experience of reading a book, says Keenan, but to entice viewers to seek out the original source material for the film, much the way director Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies boosted sales of J.R.R. Tolkien's novels.

"Turning a book into a film is not a new idea," Keenan said. "Although as one of the publishers we have been working with has said, the short films have the potential to revolutionize the way readers are introduced to books."

The Toronto-based Keenan first hit upon the idea of making books into short films as a marketing tool when working as a book publicist in



FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A short film adaptation of Susan Swan's novel *What Casanova Told Me*, airs tonight on Bravo!



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Gord Downie stars in a short based on an Al Purdy poem.

the United States. Forever trying to think of new ways to entice American readers to take interest in Canadian authors, she collaborated with Douglas Cooper to make a "music video"-style interpretation of his book *Amnesia*, the success of

which, Keenan says, dramatically increased demand for appearances by the author.

Filming Swan's book was a natural, says Keenan, since they had struck up a working relationship when she produced *Sexual Gothic*, a touring theatre production based on works by Swan, Barbara Gowdy and Eric McCormack.

Working with playwright Judith Thomson, it took Keenan six months of painstaking plotting to adapt Swan's 352-page novel into the short film. While she says it's not a new art form, but "an entertainment," the film does have to have its own artistic merit.

"One of the things we had to get our heads around was that it was not going to be a scene out of the book, which would make the film incomplete, and it was not atmospheric — it's not a montage — that it must have its own through-line," Keenan said. "It is in every way a

short film that stands alone."

Since *What Casanova Told Me* made its debut at Toronto's Worldwide Short Film Festival in May, publishers have embraced the idea of producing short films for their newest releases.

Keenan has signed development deals for future films with both Thomas Allen Publishers and McArthur & Company, including Patrick Watson's memoir *This Hour Has Seven Decades*, due out from McArthur in October.

In the meantime, *What Casanova Told Me* is scheduled to play at both book and film festivals, including the St. John's International Women's Film Festival in October, Toronto's Word on the Street later this month and the Vancouver International Writers Festival in October. Keenan is also working on a distribution deal that would make the format more widely available to the public.